

DURING the Cold War era, the Soviet Union and United States embarked on establishing diplomatic spying networks aimed at gathering political intelligence and breaking secret diplomatic codes between the embassies and their respective foreign ministries.

One notable incident which drew global media attention was the bugging of the US Embassy in Moscow and the method adopted was introducing the 'honey trap' – undercover female workers – who befriended US marines guarding the Embassy so that KGB could gain access to premises (ref: 'Moscow Station, How the KGB Penetrated the American Embassy' by Ronald Kessler). The Geneva incident has similar resonance but could be an eye-opener for the Ministry of External Affairs for future diplomatic manoeuvring not only in Geneva but in other aspects too.

There have been allegations that expenses have been incurred in violation of the administrative and financial procedure and that a civil construction contract had been awarded to a contractor with a dubious track record with implications for Sri Lanka's national security. The pertinent question that must be answered is whether the diplomatic premises had indeed been bugged by LTTE operatives in Switzerland, as alleged by Tamara Kunanayagam, former Permanent Representative to Geneva.

The motive for such a clandestine operation would have been to listen to the advance preparations by the Sri Lankan team defending Sri Lanka before UNHCR. As Dayan Jayatilleka rightly said, the 'hot war' is over and we now have to pursue a 'cold war' between separatists forces and the Government of Sri Lanka (ref: YouTube 'Bakeer Markar oration').

The cold war

The Government is not prop-

Foreign policy conundrum



Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka



Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha



Tamara Kunanayagam



Dr. Chris Nonis

of the panel of experts for the Paranagama Commission would be a welcome move even though there has been an inordinate delay in grasping the ground reality.

Exclusive diplomatic communications

Kunanayagam's revelations posit an interesting aspect which must be considered by the Government. Is there a diplomatic coding system or exclusive communications system where diplomatic communications are protected from prying eyes? Would it be high time a new diplomatic communication channel was established as all future negotiations, need not be with the UNHCR, even with other countries, can be carried out through a secure communication channel? This writer does not mean opening a 'Gmail' account but a secure official communications channel in consultation with the University of Colombo and other IT/telecommunications experts.

Global power politics have changed and a new global order is in the making. The importance of Sri Lanka's strategic position has been appreciated by India, US, Japan, Australia and China. This would trigger a clandestine diplomatic warfare in Colombo, each trying to gain a secure foothold for strategic considerations. There has got to be a paradigm shift in our foreign policy. India is closely watching what China is doing in Sri Lanka and whether Sri Lanka is in breach of the Indo-Lanka Agreement, which is the bedrock of friendship between Sri Lanka and India.

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Guest Column



By Srinath Fernando

erly geared to face the cold war as it requires people who are well-versed in international relations, communications, public diplomacy and strategic communications. There is a massive anti-Government propaganda being unleashed in the Western media. We had a non-career but highly qualified corp of diplomats of the calibre of Dayan Jayatilleka, Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, Tamara Kunanayagam, and of course Chris Nonis, who have all been ousted for reasons unknown to the general public but best known to the decision makers.

Rajiva Wijesinha was able to stump the Al Jazeera anchor who was hammering the Government with accusations of human rights violations in the backdrop of the Channel-4 revelations. He confronted the issue with his proficiency in language unique to diplomacy and was able to demolish the arguments. It was also so with Nonis's encounter with CNN.

Jayatilleka seems to have been removed on the advice of the

Government of Israel. It is not clear as to what prompted Israel to demand his removal and whether the Government could have warned Jayatilleka to tone down his anti-Israel rhetoric, if that had indeed been the case. After all Israel helped the Government in the war against terrorism and deserves some reciprocity.

There was also a tactical faux pas when the Government fielded Jayatilleka to counter human rights violations by the US, when US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher visited Sri Lanka (Sunday Times, 20 May 2007). The Government should have avoided unnecessarily verbal duels with Richard Boucher by highlighting human rights violations by the US when the US system of governance is clearly a far cry from the way the Government is run.

This was rather a matter for Republicans who could have taken Democrats in power to the task, as was the US Supreme Court. The US Supreme Court has reprimanded the US Administration for having breached the constitutional rights of individuals over draconian anti-terrorism laws and operations. This shows that the US political process is having strong checks and balances hence the US does not require any lessons from a country like Sri Lanka where political process and judicial independence have been

called into question by alert citizens.

JVP accuses the Government

The JVP accuses the Government of employing cronies for key diplomatic positions, some with educational qualifications and some with qualifications considered as being 'close to ruling classes'.

There are press reports that the Government has retained the services of lobbyists in Washington and in London. Hiring lobbyists per se does not warrant criticism as the US political process is entirely different and it requires extensive lobbying unlike in other countries. Even foreign governments, organisations and multinational companies have hired lobbyists in Washington DC to get across their messages and agendas.

The Government of Israel is having a permanent organisa-

tion in Washington exclusively dedicated for promoting bilateral relations. The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is the premier lobbyist working

in tandem with Embassy of Israel in Washington DC. The question that begs an answer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is whether these lobbyist hired by the Government have been properly screened, evaluated and whether their credentials are sufficient to promote the Government in US.

Was there a 'non-circumvention agreement' signed between the Government and lobbyists so that these organisations should not be hired by pro-separatist

diaspora organisations at the same time? It must be stressed that no amount of lobbying would produce results if the policies of the Government are not tuned in keeping with our international obligations and norms of civilised behaviour. The appointment

FT Quote

“Global power politics have changed and a new global order is in the making. The importance of Sri Lanka's strategic position has been appreciated by India, US, Japan, Australia and China. This would trigger a clandestine diplomatic warfare in Colombo, each trying to gain a secure foothold for strategic considerations. There has got to be a paradigm shift in our foreign policy”

Positioning for electoral success in Sri Lanka

"IT'S the battle for your mind, it's the battle for your mind," voiced the lanky character in the 'hampada' denim and casual T-shirt in classroom No. 4, his husky voice reverberating through the corridor. It was our marketing instructor lecturing in a cramped-up room many years ago in downtown Colombo. I was able to unearth the notes of this exercise kept in a remote section of my house and infested with small insects. The instructor was explaining to the class the concept of positioning in the complex and often absorbing realm of marketing.

He continued: "It's not what you do to the product, but what you do to the mind, not anyone's mind; it's the mind of the prospect, voter, traveller and whoever the target may be. It's the communication process between two distinct, identified sources." It was a very interactive class, exhilarating and immensely informative. I vividly recall discussing many situations concerning the topic in a distinctly Sri Lankan context. It ranged from Siddhalepa to President Premadasa.

Premadasa perception

What I remember most was discussing President Premadasa's ascent to the pinnacle of his political career and the corresponding positioning strategy that took him there.

The class represented members of both sexes from all religious hues with a median age of 32 hailing from a typical semi-urban demography. One of the tasks we had to accomplish was to describe the President in one or two words without the neighbour noticing it.

The real challenge was to describe him in just a word or two. We were given small sheets of paper; we had to write on it, roll it up and hand it over. We were roughly about 25 in the class. I remember just over 20 students representing roughly 85% described the President as a 'Common Man,'

"People's Man," "Our Man" and many descriptions with similar connotations. This was quite fascinating. There was near unanimity or cohesiveness of perceptions.

Concept of positioning

The concept of positioning starts with the product or what the product's value base represents. The product may be a service, person, political party or candidate, country, idea or whatever. The political candidate should be able to conceive, enumerate and cogently articulate his or her positioning strategy. This is critical. All politics is perception, posturing and positioning. "No other business spends as much money and time crawling around in people's minds," says positioning expert Jack Trout.

Your views should be able to resonate well with the constituency or country in an amenable and meaningful way. Your message must be authentic and credible; the strategy should be laboriously worked to gain uniqueness. The sum total of this will offer the differentiation strategy which will then be crafted by message merchants (advertising agency) providing a persuasive, sensorial and easy to understand message with a well encapsulated positioning strategy.

This preparation will enable a successful political campaign using the knowledge of the structure of the political brand (e.g. candidate, party) in order to develop competitive advantage and win support of as many voter segments as possible.

The whole process revolves around a clear cut strategy and a clear cut objective to elicit a favourable and desired



President Ranasinghe Premadasa

response. The process may be loosely defined as a management and creative process that

aims to make a brand occupy a distinct and favourable position, relative to competing brands, in the mind of the consumer.

If the product is a political candidate, the task at hand is to secure a worthwhile positioning in the voter's mind. Jack Trout again remarks: "Our perceptions are selective, so is our memory. We are cursed with the physiological limitation of not being able to process an infinite amount of stimuli." He further states: "Seeing is not akin to photographing the world, merely registering an image."

Brand, a multidimensional construct

Marketing Guru Philip Kotler defines a brand as a multidimensional construct, involving the blending of

functional and emotional values to match consumers' performance and psychosocial needs. Obama is a brand and so is Lady Gaga or Madonna. A brand can be defined as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors".

One of the goals of branding is to make a brand unique on dimensions that are both relevant and welcomed by consumers. Success in a market depends on effective brand differentiation, based on the identification, internalisation and communication of unique brand values that are both pertinent to and desired by consumers.

Perceptual mapping

Getting back to our classroom, we were asked a very pertinent question by the instructor: "Was President Premadasa's behaviour natural or choreographed?" It was discussion time. The class was urged to participate. Opinions started to crisscross and steadily expanded upon. One student said that it's difficult if not impossible to sustain cho-



US President Barack Obama

reographed behaviour. Such an unnatural behaviour is bound to show down the line.

It further revealed the common man perception was based on an amalgam of attributes derived from myriad factors integral to President Premadasa. Multidisciplinary, multi-platform connecting multi-interfaces. They included core personality, mannerisms, demeanour, style of communication, style of interaction, simplicity, dress code, parents and ancestry, style of governance, chosen residence, people association and many more.

The process we were rehearsing was an entry level exercise on perceptual mapping. Perceptual mapping is a diagrammatic technique used by marketers that attempts to visually display perceptions of customers or potential customers.

Mitt Romney

During the 2012 US presidential election, we all remember Mitt Romney, the challenger to Barack Obama. Political analysts have it that his faux pas about the infamous 47% remark, secretly captured by a member of the audience, cost him the job.

He said: "There are 47% of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47% who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That, that's an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what... These are people who pay no income tax."

These kinds of statements articulated by politicians often constitute their core beliefs. No amount of apologies will rectify the damage. This is a classic case of not being able to sustain choreographed behaviour.

Obama too had great slogans in 2008; they worked because he affected a much better campaign in an environment that

complemented good slogans. Without a resounding performance, 'Hope' might have seemed a trifle silly slogan. Even 'Change We Can Believe In' was complemented by profound resonance that jelled with the zeitgeist of the day. Obama strived really hard to define the two slogans 'Hope' and 'Change We Can Believe In' to surreal status.

Repositioning

Just as much as strategic positioning is important, so is the idea of repositioning.

If the previous strategy did not resonate with the people, it must be ditched forthwith and a new strategy formulated. In 1992 George Bush Snr. failed to reposition himself. Instead he stood pat while the electorate's attitude shifted.

America wanted change and an end to gridlock. Americans weren't happy with the economy. Bill Clinton had positioned himself as a new-generation leader who could change things in Washington. How should have Bush repositioned himself? Always start with perceptions. First, he should have started with the positive perception the public would have accorded him, that of 'world leader'.

Foreign policy also happened to be Clinton's biggest weakness. Being Governor of Arkansas doesn't give you much international experience. Critics noted adding James Baker to the product Bushes' best asset would have helped him a great deal. This could have been achieved by making him the Vice President and sidelining the inept Dan

Quale. Jack Trout states: "The ultimate marketing battleground is the mind and the better you understand how the mind works, the better you'll understand how positioning works."

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